
The importance of personal branding as an element of public relations: an international experience

A importância do personal branding como elemento de relações públicas: uma experiência de avaliação internacional

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THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSONAL BRANDING AS AN ELEMENT OF PUBLIC RELATIONS: AN INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

The present research examines the degree of knowledge that students of communication have on the subject of personal branding and on the importance of its management in the context of public relations. The personal brand concerns the perception that a person creates in the minds of others and is directly related to the ability to create bonds of an emotional nature and to establish relationships. The management of a personal brand does not mean designing and applying an egocentric strategy, but, rather, the search for the distinct characteristics of each person, according to parameters of authenticity and coherence, which are placed at everyone's service. Firstly, a literature review was conducted to determine the tools and resources that each person has to have to manage their personal brand. Then, a quantitative methodology was used, through the application of closed answer questionnaires, with which the opinions of three hundred students from three universities were collected – two Spanish and one Portuguese. The data analysis revealed a growing interest in the personal brands area and in the search for training on the subject. Portuguese students, in general, express a more defined and uniform opinion. Spanish students, on the other hand, show fewer agreeing perspectives.

KEYWORDS

personal branding; communication; professional skills; knowledge; public relations

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RESUMO

A presente investigação examina o grau de conhecimento que os estudantes de comunicação detêm sobre o assunto da marca pessoal (*personal branding*) e sobre a importância da sua gestão no contexto das relações públicas. A marca pessoal diz respeito à percepção que um indivíduo gera na mente de outros e está diretamente relacionada com a capacidade de criar vínculos

de natureza emocional e de estabelecer relacionamentos. A gestão de uma marca pessoal não significa desenhar e aplicar uma estratégia egocêntrica, mas, antes, a procura das características distintas de cada pessoa, de acordo com parâmetros de autenticidade e coerência, que são colocados ao serviço de todos. A partir de uma revisão da literatura, determinaram-se as ferramentas e os recursos de que cada indivíduo dispõe para gerir a sua marca pessoal. Em seguida, utilizou-se uma metodologia quantitativa, através da aplicação de questionários de resposta fechada, com os quais se recolheram as opiniões de trezentos estudantes de três universidades – duas espanholas e uma portuguesa. A análise dos dados revelou um interesse crescente na área das marcas pessoais e na procura de formação sobre o tema. Os estudantes portugueses, em geral, manifestam uma opinião mais definida e uniforme. Já os estudantes espanhóis mostram perspectivas menos concordantes.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

personal branding; comunicação; competências profissionais; conhecimento; relações públicas

INTRODUCTION

Personal branding has become a key tool in public relations. In this regard, the objective of this research is finding out the perception university students and future professionals have of it and the importance they give to the management of their personal brand.

The important social, economic and cultural changes that have taken place in the world of communication, which is increasingly more globalized and interconnected every day, are not external to the field of Public Relations. As a consequence, it is important to revise the different theories and practices that are carried out in this scope for guiding companies as well as professionals to achieve their aims (Arana, Vázquez & González, 2017; Kunsch, 2017). In fact, the new ways of consuming information and establishing relationships demand that the senders of messages make constant efforts to see their attempt at contact recognized and acknowledged (Arméndariz, 2015).

The modern human being is absorbed in a new social model which gives priority to the person and the collaborative communication either among professionals or between a company and its publics (Marfil-Carmona, Hergueta Covacho & Villalonga Gómez, 2015). The communicational monopoly enterprises used to have is no longer exclusive to them and people are the main characters now. Individuals have become their own companies and they must show their values and abilities, handling their own brand for achieving greater renown (Arana et al., 2017; Pérez Chavarria & Rodríguez Ruiz, 2012; Salas & Solanilla, 2018). This bidirectional relation of communication must be as efficient as possible due to the widespread growth of information, as well as it constitutes the foundation and one of the strategic tools of public relations (Nava, 2012).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Public relations constitute a process of continuous, dynamic and structured communication, in which it is important to consider that the results of communication

depend not only on what is said, but also on how it is said, when it is said and by whom it is said. Such aspects belong to the personal level and to the individual's essence as a brand. Among the several existing definitions of public relations, all authors agree with the idea that it is a planned and bidirectional subject that pursues the dialogue between speaker and receiver and it is based on pillars like transparency, research, integration, harmony, promotion and positioning (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2001; González, 2013, 2016; Nava, 2012; Wilhelm, Ramírez & Sánchez, 2009; Xifra, 2005). Guerrero (2003) states that this discipline is defined as an interdisciplinary social communication as it receives nourishment from scopes like Anthropology, Sociology, Philosophy or Psychology. Moreover, its humanist aspect conditions a constant evolution and permits an enrichment from other areas without losing its essence.

Every organization or individual is formed by a group of significant elements that shape their identity, their personal brand. Those are characteristics that are identified by the receiver and that contribute to the making of a mental image by the receiver. That recreation made by the audience is composed by beliefs, values or attributes transmitted by the speaker and that provide them with the differentiation and identification (Capriotti, 2009). And it is precisely that thought created in the receiver that constitutes the essence of personal branding, term whose origin is set at the end of the last century in the United States and provided by Tom Peters:

until the beginning of this century there has not been produced any movement that had conceptually shaped this idea. It was Tom Peters in the United States who officially gave name to this way of understanding professional relationships. In August 1997, published in "Fast Company" magazine, an emblematic article which established the basic personal branding philosophy. (Pérez, 2012, p. 87)

In the article "The brand called you", Peters (1997) talks about how people, as well as companies, have their own brand and they are responsible for it. The author states that, in a world marked by competition, the best method for an individual to stand out is to manage personal careers as companies manage their products or services brands. Each person must recognize their identifying characteristics, their attributes and strengths so they can offer them to others. A person is no longer defined by their working position but by the projects they have and fulfil during their career. Everything the person does transmits their brand's value and nature.

Other reflections, as the importance of connecting with other people (Marcos, 2009) as well as satisfying their needs and requests (McNally & Speak, 2002), have been added to this definition. In essence, it consists of transmitting which one is the value proposal, that aspect that makes the person unique and that is based in elements such as authenticity or distinction (Arruda, 2009; Kaputa, 2005; Schawbel, 2011). Personal branding is the emotion produced in the mind of people we establish contact with and it is based on a responsible and individual process (Molares-Cardoso, 2016). Definitions do not differ a lot; they use different linguistics but the theme's heart has lots of common

points. Most of the acceptations are structured on two main pillars: the individual's value proposal and the connection established with the rest of people.

Andrés Pérez (2012) argues that "personal branding is in charge of discovering, choosing and giving visibility to those elements or attributes that make us desirable, trustworthy and finally chosen" (p. 83). The author believes that personal branding is the equivalent to the person's DNA, the aspect that makes people unique and that is also related with its developing stages: D goes for distinguish; N is related with the name and its fame and A is related with the analysis, attributes and authenticity. And it is precisely this essence or trace our image produces the one that creates the elemental personal branding pillar.

Personal branding synthesizes the way an individual introduces their to other people and the way they are seen by them, being closely related to the ability of creating emotional bonds through the relations established with them. As a consequence, the basis over personal brands are handled are visibility, perception, authenticity and singularity (Molares-Cardoso & Montero Campos, 2018). And the elements that form the individual's personal brand are: the physical appearance, the behaviour, the message, the networking or the kind of relations the individual establishes with other people and the individual's presences on the internet.

The personal branding is the result of a research process with the main purpose of reaching a presence that allows connecting with the audience, therefore it is possible to state that it is part of any public relations project (Jiménez-Morales, 2016; Xifra, 2007). This plan follows some steps for its execution and is implemented with a personal branding strategy. Each person must be able to discover who they are, what they can offer and through which ways they are going to transmit this information (Pérez, 2012; Recolons, 2014).

Thus, having into account the different theories for creating a personal branding plan (Brennan & Mattice, 2014; Khedher, 2014; Molares-Cardoso, 2017; Philbrick & Cleveland, 2015; Rampersad, 2008), it can be summed up in three steps from the individual's inside to outside:

1. knowledge and self-assessment: introspection, where the individual analyses their beliefs, values, abilities, competences and personal motivation;
2. strategy and diagnosis: external diagnosis in which it is possible to define the vision, mission, message, aims, audience, positioning and a plan of action;
3. communication and connection: definition of the ways and channels (online and offline) the message is going to be received, as well as defining the individual's visibility.

The value of a personal brand lies on the group of reactions a person causes in the audience they connects with. It is a tool of the public relations field as it comes from a strategic plan for obtaining a communication stream that allows positioning (Jiménez-Morales, 2016).

METHODOLOGY

To develop this research, quantitative methodology was used, namely closed answer questionnaires and by taking the individual as the analysis unit, information from 300 university students attending their degrees in the communication field has been collected. The chosen universities were University of Vigo (Degree in Advertising and Public Relations), University of A Coruña (Degree in Audiovisual Communication and Degree in Administration and Business Management) and the University of Minho (Degree in Communication Sciences). This research (the data was collected between 2015 and 2018) is part of a wider research project that started in 2015 and is gathering data from other European and American universities.

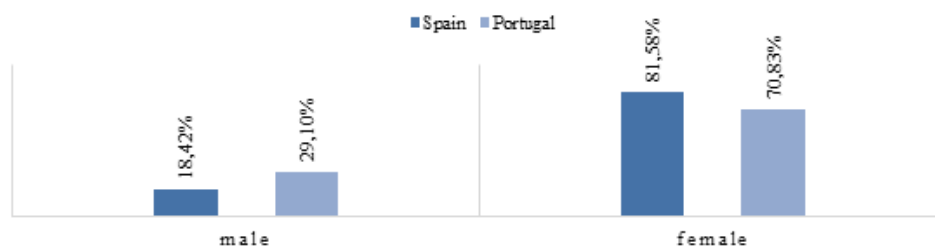
The survey was given to the students after they had a session in which the basic aspects of personal branding were explained. Regarding the content of the survey, apart from the personal information questions related with the age, gender and nationality, it was composed by 14 questions divided into three modules. From the first question to the 10th question, general aspects and personal branding elements were analysed. From 11th to 13th, the five elements composing the personal brand, the importance of physical appearance and personal branding plan phases were revised. The last question dealt with the importance of acquiring knowledge about the topic for the professional future.

The possible answers were numbers in a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means “totally agree” or being the “most important”, and 5 means “disagree” or being the “less important”. Two of 14 questions are yes/no questions. The statistical analysis of the data provided the following results.

RESULTS

The features of the sample show the most frequent age among the inquired was 21 in the Spanish students' case (42,11% of the sample), and 22 in the Portuguese students (41,67% of the sample). The age of the other students varies from 20 to 33 years, with residual percentages below 8%.

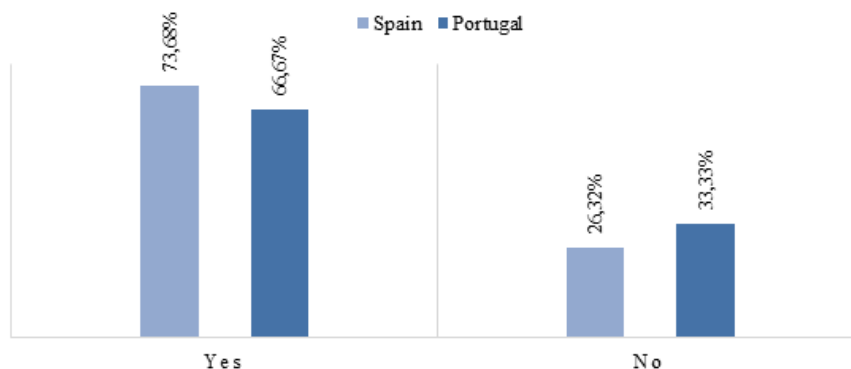
Dealing with gender, the wider presence of women in degrees related with communication is confirmed. In Spain and Portugal, male students representing the 18,42% and the 29,17% respectively (Graph 1).



Graph 1: Sample distribution by genre

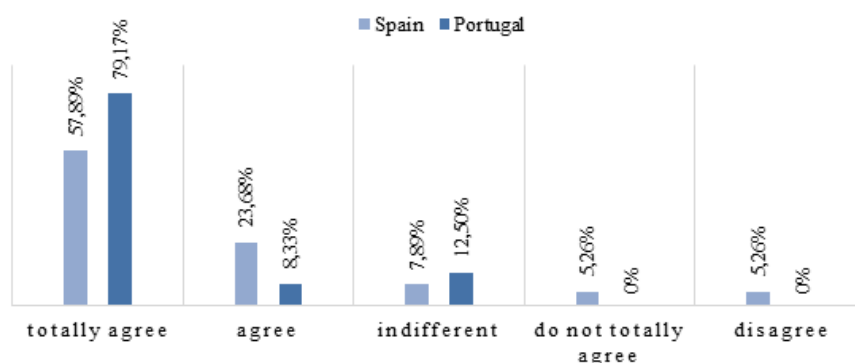
When it comes to the nationalities present in the sample, in Spain 100% are Spanish while in Portugal 83,3% are Portuguese, with 11,50% of Brazilian students and 4.17% of Cape Verdean students.

In the first question, which works as an introduction, students were asked, before the theoretical session they later had, if they had ever thought about the importance of personal branding and about the need of working their own personal brand at a personal and professional level. It was observed that a portion of the students in their last academic year had never thought about the importance of managing their personal brand (26,32% of the Spanish students and the 33,33% of the Portuguese students) (Graph 2).



Graph 2: The importance of personal branding and its managing

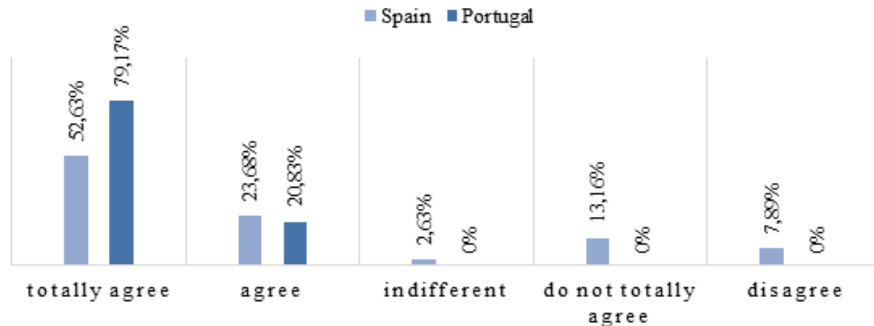
Even though an important percentage had not reflected about this topic before, the second question analysed if they consider they have a personal brand. The results showed responses of agreement: more than a half of the Spanish students totally agree with this statement and almost 80% of Portuguese students think the same too (Graph 3).



Graph 3: The individual has a personal brand

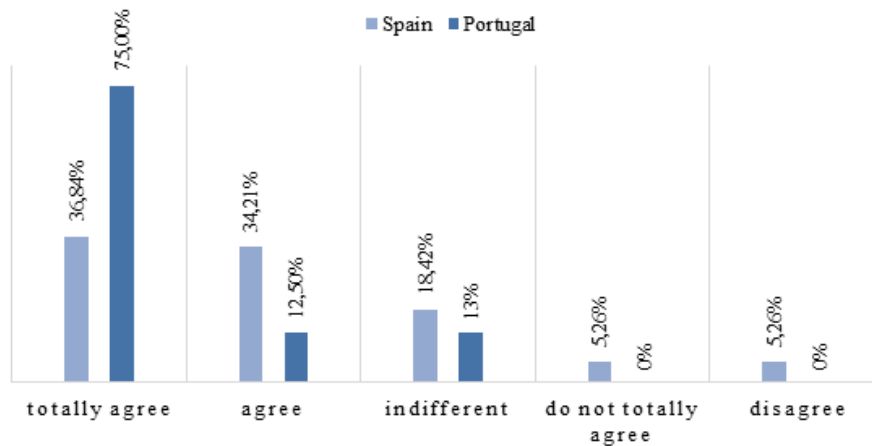
The third question focused on one of the personal branding's pillars and so students were asked about in which degree they agree with the statement: "personal branding is identifying which is our proposal of value and recognizing the aspect that makes us

unique”. Portuguese students totally agree or just agree. Spaniards have a wider range of opinions: 52,63% of the students totally agree, however, it is important how students who do not totally agree and disagree represent the 23,68% of the sample (Graph 4).



Graph 4: Personal branding means identifying our value proposal

The fourth question analyses a misconception associated with personal branding. People tend to think that a person has several personal brands depending on the situation they deal with, however, there is just one personal brand, despite each individual being capable of assuming different roles. Portuguese students showed more agreement with this statement than Spanish students, who showed more variable percentages (Graph 5).

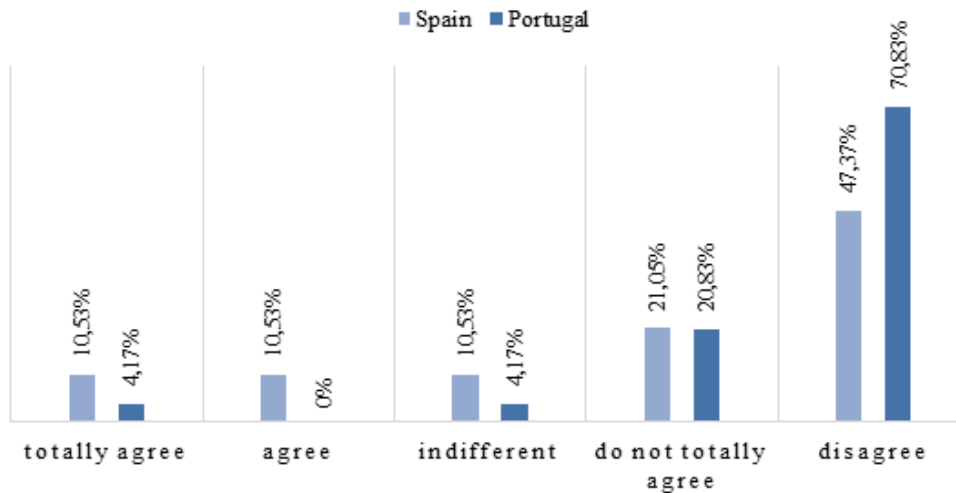


Graph 5: A person cannot be separated from the brand

The following three questions continued working on inexact perceptions about personal branding. With this purpose, the fifth question analysed the belief that only famous people should manage their personal brands. Spanish and Portuguese students alike show a high degree of disagreement: 63,16% of Spanish students totally disagree with this idea and 83,33% of Portuguese think the same. The sixth question was related to the previous and dealt with the statement that having a personal brand is linked with being

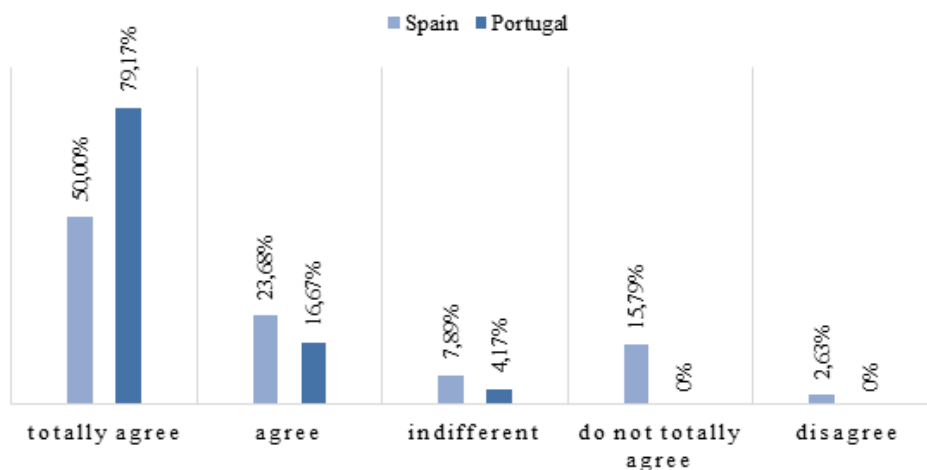
extravagant and 57,89% of Spanish students and 79,7% of Portuguese students totally disagree with it.

The seventh question referred to the idea that personal branding only applies on the individual's presence on social networks. A high disagreement is shown by Portuguese students (70,83%) while Spaniards show more diversity in their answers (Graph 6).



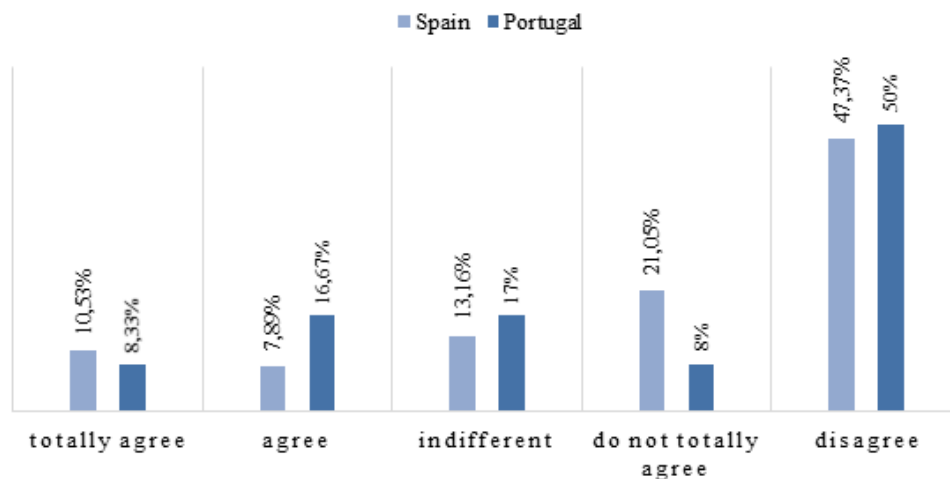
Graph 6: Personal branding is based exclusively on the usage of social networks

As a complement to this question, another question was raised, which sought to measure the degree of agreement with the statement: "my personal branding is formed by one online and offline part". Portuguese students displayed a higher percentage of agreement than Spanish who, although 50% totally agree with the idea, 15,79% do not totally agree and 2,63% disagree (Graph 7).



Graph 7: Personal branding is formed by an online and an offline part

The ninth question insisted again on the concept that all individuals have a personal brand. In this case, the question analysed the agreement with the sentence: “my personal brand does not exist until I start working on it” (Graph 8). Almost 50% of the students, Spanish and Portuguese alike, showed that they totally disagree with this statement. The personal brand does exist and the management of it constitutes an individual responsibility.

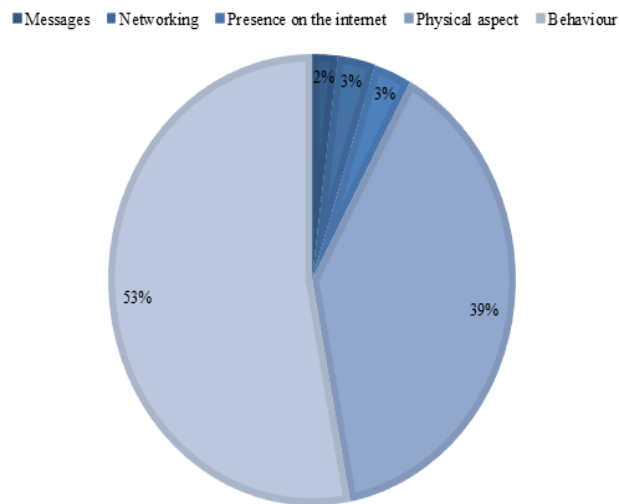


Graph 8: Personal brand does not exist until I start working on it

The 10th question was the last one from the first module of generic questions and it asked students about the level of agreement with the definition of personal brand as the trace or essence we leave on other people. In general terms, students showed their agreement with the hypothesis: 75% of the Portuguese students totally agree and the 25% left agree. In the case of the Spanish students, the percentages fluctuate more and 60,53% of students stated they totally agree, 23,68% agree, 2,63% are indifferent, 5,26% do not totally agree and 7,89% do not agree or disagree (Graph 8).

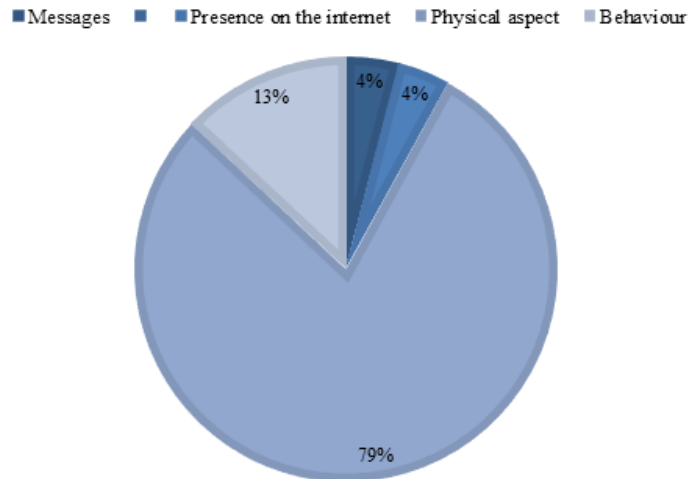
The 11th question dealt with personal branding components (physical appearance, behaviour/nonverbal communication, messages, networking and presence on the internet). Respondent students were asked to order these components from most important to less important. Results are presented by countries (Graph 9 and 10).

For the Spanish students the most important feature is behaviour (53%) followed by physical appearance (39%). Far from these percentages, it is possible to find the presence on the internet and networking with 3%, and messages represented by 2%.



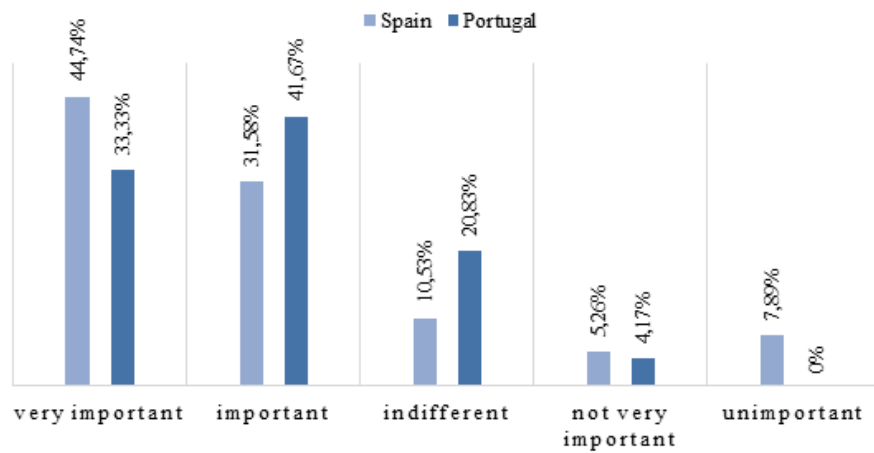
Graph 9: Most important feature in personal branding - Spain

For the Portuguese students, physical appearance is the most important element (79%), as behaviour gets second place in the list for 13% of the students. Regarding messages or the presence on the internet, just 4% consider them the most important point. It is worth mentioning that for any of the students asked networking is the most important feature in their personal brands.

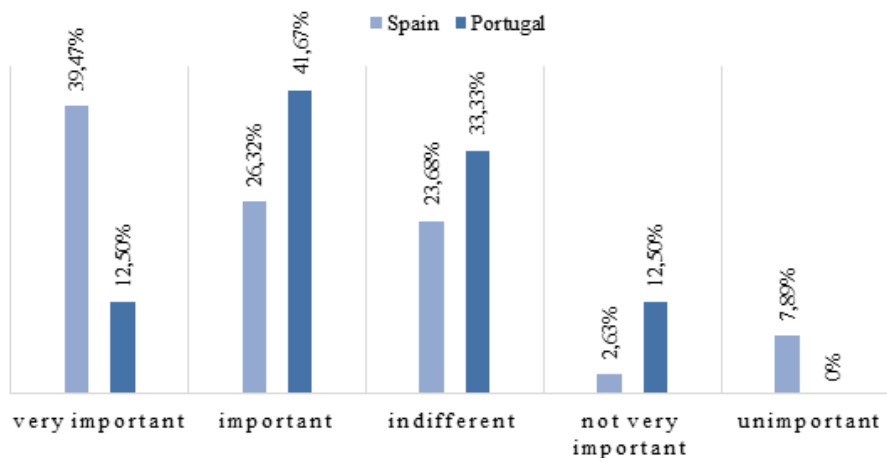


Graph 10: Most important element in personal branding

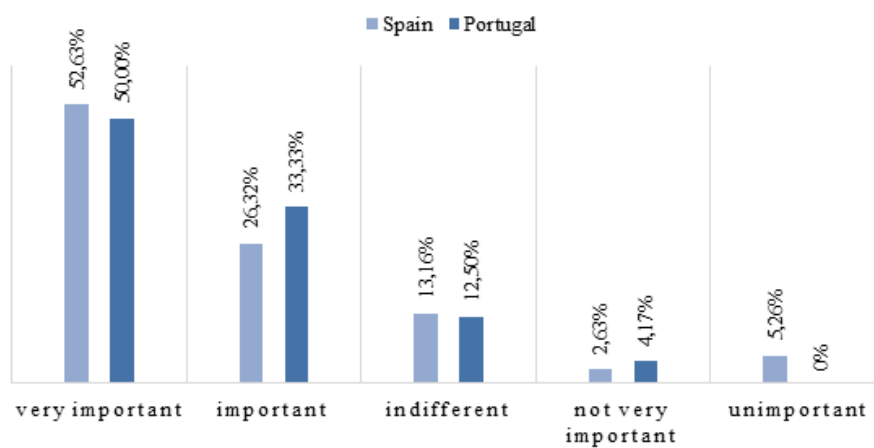
In question number 12, physical appearance theme was explored by asking students about how important they think knowledge about morphology is (knowing their body type or body shape), about harmony of colour (knowing which colour suits them better), about items of clothing (understanding what kind of clothing suits them better) and about the face (for understanding proportions and correcting, if necessary, imperfections). Results highlight that the acquisition of knowledge about any of the previous themes seems very important for the students (Graph 11, 12, 13 and 14).



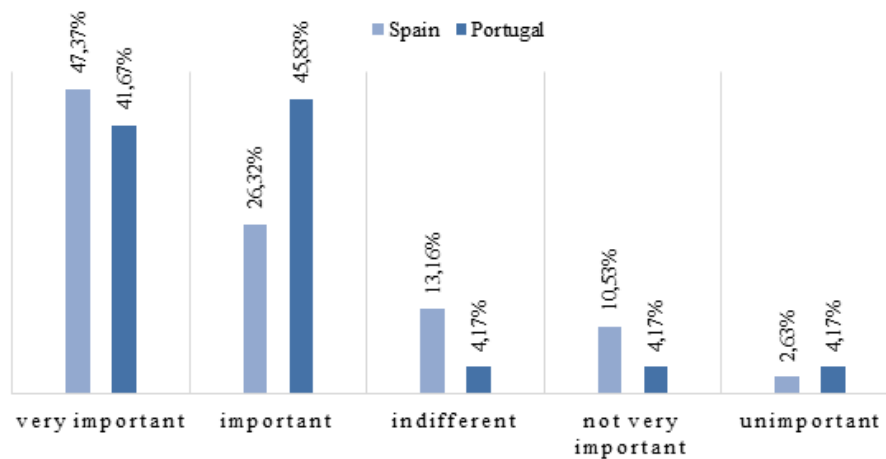
Graph 11: Importance of knowledge about morphology



Graph 12: Importance of knowledge about colour harmony

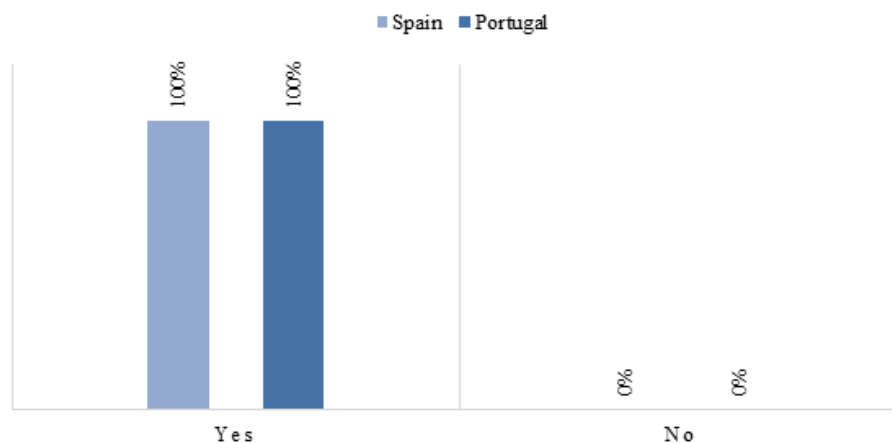


Graph 13: Importance of knowledge about clothing



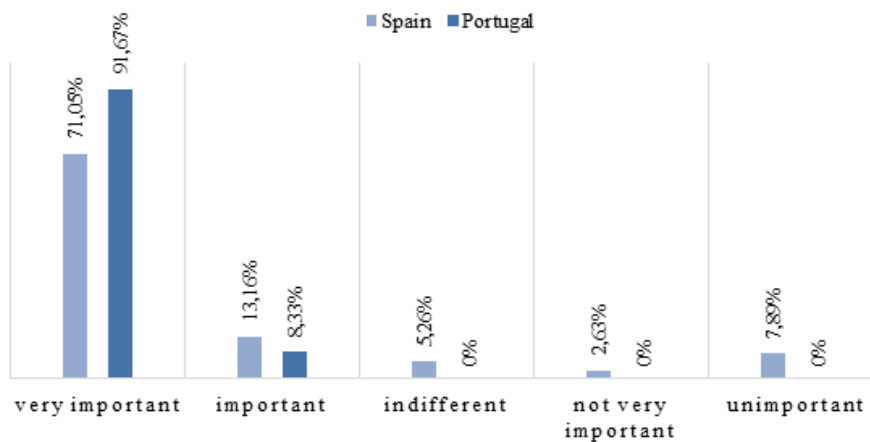
Graph 14: Importance of knowledge about the face

The next-to-last question focused around the idea of setting a plan of personal branding. The students' level of acceptance of the three phases for managing their personal brands previously established by experts was tested: the self-assessment, strategy and communication and 100% of the sample agreed (Graph 15).



Graph 15: Stages of a personal branding plan

Finally, in the last question, students were asked to value the importance that this kind of knowledge has for their personal and professional aims. Their answers showed representative percentages in very important and important sections, finding values over the 70% from the Spanish students sample and higher values than 90% from the Portuguese students.



Graph 16: The importance of personal branding

CONCLUSIONS

Public relations strategies, in a global society, imply new visions and constant adaptation. The individual has become the protagonist and as such they must consider that in the current labour market, characterised by flexibility, they should act as their own company and manage their personal brand.

The management of an individual's personal branding is part of public relations as they have to establish a planned and bidirectional communication with the audience, in order to achieve certain degree of positioning and fame. Thus, the higher the level of knowledge about the basis and elements that shape the personal brand and about how to start and handle a personal branding plan, the higher the possibilities of establishing links with the audience.

In general terms, it is possible to see that students are aware of and agree with the existence of personal brands, but it can be highlighted that over 25% of students had not thought about the importance of personal branding and the needs of managing it until then.

Regarding the misconceptions associated with personal branding, Spanish students were more convinced that this concept should be pondered only by public figures. On the other hand, Portuguese students seem more aware that this is not the case and that management of personal branding is a responsibility of oneself. When analysing the concept of personal brands being something else than social media presence, 91,66% of Portuguese students agree and totally agree, while in the Spanish sample, these values represent 68,42%. This question is supported by the one following it, which analyses if personal branding is formed by an online and an offline part. Again, Portuguese students show a higher level of consciousness as samples do not present any percentage for the parameters do not totally agree and disagree, while Spanish students' answers present disagreement.

Dealing with which one is the most important element in personal branding, more than a half of the Spanish students consider it is behaviour, feature that is just supported

as the most important one by the 13% of Portuguese students, who consider physical appearance the most important characteristic for almost the 80% of them. By going deeper in the concepts of personal appearance and the importance of knowledge about its parameters, all students show interest in acquiring information about the type of body they have, the colours and items of clothing that suit them better as well as understanding the dimensional parameters of their face.

To sum up, Portuguese students are more aware of the importance of handling their personal branding so they show a higher level of coherence in their answers. On the other hand, Spanish students show interest in the topic but in a less defined way, presenting a higher level of contradiction in their answers. Whereby, it would be appropriate boosting and increasing personal branding education in the public relations field in order to allow the individual to manage their personal identity.

Translation: Julinda Molares-Cardoso, Carmen López de Aguieta and Beatriz Legerén Lago

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